

MOTIVATE MICHIGAN

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WHAT'S HAPPENING THIS MONTH

Motivate Michigan Monthly Phone Call..... Thursday, November 14
Righteous Sons presents Comedy Fundraiser Saturday, November 16
Monthly Criminal Justice Reform Forum Meeting Tuesday, November 19
Women's Empowerment Breakfast Saturday, December 7

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Local NLA Hosts Rally at Michigan State Capitol for Criminal Justice Reform



Amani Sawari | October 17, 2019 | sawarimi.org

On Wednesday, October 10th, at 11:00a EST dozens of community members, including family of incarcerated people, their allies, activists and elected officials came together to advocate for critical reforms that Michigan's Department of Corrections is in desperate need of. Attendees were asked to display an image of their incarcerated loved one on either a T-shirt, framed picture or poster; this doubled the number of faces that 'showed up' in strong support.

There were a wide variety of speakers who shared their experiences with the criminal legal system and the changes that they

wanted to see according to those experiences. These included impacted family members like Makiyah Clay, the daughter of inside NLA member, currently serving as the chapter's National Communications Director. Her father, currently a secretary for the NLA 1024 chapter, was taken from her when she was less than a year old and now as a young woman in her 20s her memories of him are confined by visiting rooms and expensive phone calls. This experience was shared by another speaker, William Hawkins, whose father is the president of the local NLA 1024 Chapter. Hawkins, the son of a juvenile lifer, shared his frustration with not having his father present for the significant moments of his life including grade school sports games, graduations and his wedding. The harm caused by incarceration extends far beyond the incarcerated individual.

There are over 40,000 people forced to reside in Michigan's state prisons but the number of people restricted in their life's development due to the impact of Michigan's mass incarceration problem exceeds far beyond that number into hundreds of thousands of people who are directly connected to those 40,000. Its heartbreaking to hear about that damage, to know that the years stolen from families can never be restored. For many enforced mandatory minimums aim to steal hundreds of more years from Michigan families.

However, in all of this there is a silver lining and that lining shined bright at NLA's rally. A group of incarcerated organizers from the local Michigan 1024 chapter who had no access to the internet, no way to call their legislator, no ability to travel freely or to stand on the capitol steps were able stretch their banner across those steps in spite of all those and many other obstacles. They were able communicate to hundreds of people over the course of the months leading up to the rally to attend and were able to recruit dozens of impacted speakers. Through the many barriers they'd

even attracted several representatives to speak in support of their initiatives. Incarcerated NLA organizers in the 1025 chapter hosted a very successful statewide rally at the most prestigious location for demonstration, all from the behind bars.

Through this effort it's clear to see that one of the most powerful gifts that prisoners have is their organizing power. Their inability to be physically present with us fuels their passion, developing their recruitment and promotional skillsets. Imprisoned people are forced to build networks outside of their environment and to strengthen those networks. The NLA, as a national organization already has a strong network in comparison to the vast majority of inside organizations that compete for outside support, but NLA chapter 1024 was able to strengthen their statewide network by hosting this rally. Not only were they able to strengthen their own network but they also created a space for community organizers and family members to develop networks. The NLA developed that statewide network of criminal justice reform supporters while advancing their agenda to legislators.

I had the pleasure of speaking during the event about the Good Time Campaign to end mandatory minimums in our state by restoring good time credits and allowing prisoners to earn time off of their sentences for demonstrating good behavior, holding a job, completing their GED, earning degrees and otherwise demonstrating their rehabilitation. The goal of the state should be to have less people incarcerated and filter people out of prisons who are focused on equipping themselves to function as civilians on the outside. I'd brought a stack of #PassMIGoodTime Newsletters that left my hands faster than I expected after I spoke. I was pleased to see so many people committed to seeing Good Time restored in Michigan.

I was even more excited to see several state representatives like Kyra Bolden, Cynthia Johnson and other members of the Michigan Legislative Black Caucus, speak to the crowd in support of their demanded reforms, including ending mandatory minimums and restoring good time credits. They pleaded with attendees to be consistent with contacting the legislature about the reforms that they demand to see. While legislators continue to advocate for these reforms, it is imperative that they can identify concrete examples provided by their constituents as to why these reforms must be incorporated immediately.

It is our job as constituents to voice our concerns and organize in support of legislation that responds to those concerns. With multiple elected officials standing behind the initiatives of imprisoned people and their wide variety of outside supporters, any legislator that chooses to stand in the way of incorporating these reforms should be ashamed. I am always left in awe of what imprisoned people, especially in the state of Michigan, have been able to organize in our community from behind the wall.

This is not the first event that incarcerated leaders have organized and it won't be the last. Inside organizers with the support of outside allies should be hosting events like this at the capitol building regularly until all of their demands are met, all of which are not unreasonable.

Michigan's Corrections Department is far behind the majority of states, and rather than allowing this to persist, it is our responsibility as residents to make sure that our state closes that huge gap. It's events like these that inspire and motivate me in the work that I do on their behalf and I eagerly look forward to participate in even more opportunities to collaborate with the NLA and other similarly aligned groups in Michigan and across the country.



Richard Griffin, ACLU-MI field organizer, speaks to crowd on Michigan Capitol steps during NLA Rally



(Left) Shawanna Vaughn, founder of Silent Cry (NY) with Richard Griffin, ACLU-MI field organizer at NLA Rally



(Right) seated attendees with posters listening to speakers outside of Michigan state capitol building



Rally Speakers [Left to Right] JaMo Thomas, former juvenile lifer; Amani Sawari, National Coordinator (holding an image of herself & incarcerated activist Chanton Miles at ARF); Eileen Slater-Hinton, mother of Dyson X (holding an image herself with her son incarcerated at ARF) and Shawanna Vaughn (holding image of incarcerated activist Quentin Jones at ARF, co-founder of My Life Matters Too)

Mass Movements Help Reveal How Much Agency We Actually Have

Lacino Hamilton | October, 2019 | Marquette Branch



I know of no sure way of pretending where things will go from here, whether others will hear or respond, or how quickly or slowly. Or whether the actual fail to vitalize others, will come to a grinding halt and then in there, it's actors stigmatized or dismissed as fools. One swallows dry and takes a chance."
-Daniel Barrigan, member of the Plowshares Eight

One of the things I've learned studying the prison movement is that there are a lot of radicals working through prison reform channels because there isn't a mass abolitionist alternative to ply their where's and passions. Many radicals have taken the position that instead of waiting on a mass abolitionist movement to develop, it is best to struggle in the immediate for strategic reforms that will hopefully lay the groundwork for future abolition. If one agrees or disagrees with that position, I think there is near universal agreement that there is no mass abolition movement. Not that there isn't an abolition movement, because there is and it is impactful despite non-stop attempts to discredit and marginalize it but it's not a popular movement. While I was in discussion recently with someone about the legacy of Fannie Lou Hamer, it occurred to me that if there wasn't a mass black freedom movement back in the day, a popular struggle for self-determination, she may not have a legacy to discuss.

What I mean is, Fannie Lou Hamer was someone whose talents as an organizer and capacities as a leader and orator may never have been revealed if there hadn't been a mass movement against Jim Crow. But because there was such a movement, and organizations plugged into that movement at every level focused on organizing local people like Fannie Lou Hamer, people with little or no formal education little or no material resources, and who had the most to lose because they had the least societal protections, Fannie Lou Hamer has an illustrious legacy. Fannie Lou Hamer was a black woman from Mississippi born in 1917, the youngest of 20 children, who literally worked from the age of six in the cotton fields of the Jim Crow South as a sharecropper. For those who don't know, sharecropping wasn't just the actions of a nefarious landowner here or there, it was slavery by another name organized from the very top of society. A system where black people worked in the fields under hyper-exploitive conditions, upheld by racist laws and tactics designed to create perpetual debt which preserve white political domination over blacks.

When most images of the protest and rebellion from that era are shown it is of young people, mostly college students, very articulate, and armed with facts they appear to know forwards and backwards. Fannie Lou Hamer was 44 years old at the time, she didn't speak so-called proper English or from things she memorized out of books. She never had the benefit of a "proper" education because she and all 19 of her siblings were forced to slave in the fields. But this is what actually made her effective—her powerful sense of urgency being inside an oppressive system. In the cotton fields Fannie Lou Hamer was a timekeeper, which meant she played a leading role in negotiating on behalf of other sharecroppers. She was great at improving and quickly coming up with solutions to problems, a talent poor people and people up against great odds the world over possess. In prison we call this talent "jailing". When someone says something like, "he's jailing", it is in reference to making something designed for one purpose work for another; salvaging something thought to be of no use; or making a little go a long way. Fannie Lou Hamer's experiences and talents and skills were revealed in the black freedom movement, revealed through working with SNCC, which led to another significant organizing and organizations. One of them being the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party MFDP. Its goal as an independently organized political party open to everyone regardless of race, was access to the ballot in order to unseat and

the all-white Mississippi Democratic delegation who's Jim Crow tactics made it impossible for blacks to participate in formal political system. Led by Fannie Lou Hamer, the 68 member MFDP delegation went to Atlantic City for the 1964 Democratic National Convention. The sabotage of MFDP delegates cannot be recorded in the counters of this short writing, but the experience revealed that white racism wasn't just the Mississippi problem, it was a national problem that went all the way up to the White House.

Fannie Lou Hamer was not acting as an individual, nor in isolation as an orator, but as a member of the student nonviolent coordinating committee SNCC, which facilitated average everyday people plugging into mass movements. Fannie Lou Hamer admitted as much that she never would have had the courage as an individual to confront Jim Crow, never would have had the strength as an individual to confront the terror and violence that Jim Crow was predicated upon. And even if she did, she didn't she said she never would have known where to begin if it was not for SNCC and the larger movement. It was through a popular movement that Fannie Lou Hamer's talents and capacities were revealed on a scale she, or a few other people, ever would have imagined possible: A Black woman sharecropper in the Jim Crow South, with less than a sixth grade education turned local organizer, preeminent orator, takes on the national Democratic party at the national Democratic Convention, one of the biggest U.S. political stages. A mass prison abolition movement possesses the potential to do the same today. It possesses the potential to facilitate poor and oppressed people's participation in social action on a scale many incarcerated men and women probably cannot imagine right now.

Social justice perpetuates the belief that some groups are superior and establishes systems of advantage and privileges for those groups while simultaneously defining other groups as inferior and deserving of marginalization, disenfranchisement and exploitation. Of course action is the natural antidote, but action in isolation, not in concert with others, is a prescription for despair. Mass movements assist to develop a shared analysis and grow understanding of the perspective nature of social justice woven throughout social institutions, as well as the ways that our shame, our silence, our will for ignorance, our refusal to take risks, and are turning away from problems all play a part. Mass movement will, or at least has great potential, to reveal how much agency and power we actually have. The purpose of mass movement is to enable people to understand that social injustice is not part of the natural order of things but rather the result of historical and socially constructed human forces that can be changed by humans. The goal of this understanding is connecting awareness and action, and that's becoming, like Fannie Lou Hamer did, an actor in one's own history. Creativity, risk-taking, and ingenuity "jailing" unshackled from worries about national reputation, concerned donors, or uncensored stakeholders. Fannie Lou Hamer's social action did not end with participation in the black freedom movement. She went on to be active in virtually every front that related to fighting racism and for the rights of black locally as well as nationally. And one of her most important projects was a freedom farm, where she bought forty acres and ran a cooperative aimed at providing for various needs of impoverished people regardless of their race.

Fannie Lou Hamer's legacy has been sanitized to the point where few people nowadays actually know who she was, which is a tragedy. Many few people know that there was a time when she was considered the most powerful orator outside of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King jr. Therefore, she would have had to have been one of the best orders of all time because Malcolm and Martin are considered to be the best. Unfortunately, this reflects the way leading black women in general, such as Ella Baker, Diane Nash, Kathleen Cleaver, Joanne Robinson, and many others, have been overlooked or arsed from the history of a movement they shouldered and carried on their backs. My takeaway from Fannie Lou Hamer's legacy is that groups which are organizing around social injustice must keep asking how to empower and develop leadership from people most impacted by injustice. And that mass movements create this opportunity to gather and work out critical questions, debates, contradictions and problems necessary to generate a stronger foundation to build upon. Mass movements help reveal how much agency we actually have.

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These are the NATIONAL DEMANDS of the men and women in federal, immigration and state prisons:

1. Immediate improvements to the conditions of prisons and prison policies that recognize the humanity of imprisoned men and women.

2. An immediate end to prison slavery. All persons imprisoned in any place of detention under United States jurisdiction must be paid the prevailing wage in their state or territory for their labor.

3. Rescission of the Prison Litigation Reform Act, allowing imprisoned humans a proper channel to address grievances and violations of their rights.

4. Rescission of the Truth in Sentencing Act and the Sentencing Reform Act so that imprisoned humans have a possibility of rehabilitation and parole. No human shall be sentenced to death by incarceration or serve any sentence without the possibility of parole.

5. An immediate end to the racial overcharging, over-sentencing and parole denials of Black and brown humans. Black humans shall no longer be denied parole because the victim of the crime was white, which is a particular problem in Southern states.

6. An immediate end to racist gang enhancement laws targeting Black and Brown humans.

7. No denial of access to rehabilitation programs for imprisoned humans at their place of detention because of their label as a violent offender.

8. State prisons must be funded specifically to offer more rehabilitation services.

9. Reinstatement of Pell grant eligibility to prisoners in all US states and territories

10. Recognition of voting rights for all confined citizens serving prison sentences, pretrial detainees and so-called "ex-felons." Their votes must be counted. Representation is demanded. All voices count!